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ABSTRACT

The life space interview, in which a teacher (or other important member of the child's world) interacts with a student in terms of the student's direct life experience in order to set boundaries and appropriate actions, is an effective technique for structured interaction with adolescents with severe behavior disorders. In order to facilitate the life space interview there are two categories of objectives - the clinical exploitation of life events and emotional first aid. The following are five specific objectives of clinical exploitation: reality rub in, which helps the student verbalize the actual flow of events; symptom estrangement, which provides evidence of past achievement; massaging value areas, which encourages those value areas that are still intact; new tool salesmanship, which uses past positive life experience to promote alternative reactions to given situations; and self acceptance, which recognizes appropriate actions. Among the specific objectives of emotional first aid are assistance while a student drains off frustration; support for the management of fury, panic, and/or guilt; and maintenance of communication during difficult periods. Timing and relevancy are also important considerations. (PHR)

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An Overview of the
Life Space Interview Technique

for presentation with the
Greene County Learning
Center Program

Director Mrs. Doris Purdom

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In my experience the Life Space Interview is an effective technique for a structured interaction with Severe Behavior Disorders at the adolescent age. The Life Space Interview as an avenue of classroom therapy dates from the late forties and early fifties, where it was established by Dr. Fritz Redl in the Pioneer House in Detroit. I have had the privilege of having Dr. Redl in the classroom and discussing this technique with him. He was a consultant to the program last year and has been a great help this year also. Yet seldom in discussing other programs is this therapeutic technique mentioned as being purposefully used in the classroom.

The Life Space Interview is my interaction with the student, as a member of his life space and interacting within his life space, with pre-determined objectives established. The goal of this is to see the student perceive, analyze, and react appropriately with his life experiences within the boundaries and value areas established in his life space, the classroom.

"The Life Space Interview is closely built around the child's direct life experience in connection the issues which become the focus of the interview,...

it is held by a person who is perceived by the child to be a part of his... life space with some pretty clear role and... influence in his daily living..." (Redl 1957)

To accomplish the Life Space Interview there are two major categories of objectives which can be used as guidelines. One major category is labeled the Clinical Exploitation of Life Events. These objectives are concerned with those children whose perception of life events differs greatly from reality. This category is then broken down in a number of more specific objectives.

The first of these objectives, Reality Rub In, is the verbalization of a specific sequence of events directed to the student from an eye witness to establish the actual flow of events at that time.

Last October four of the students were throwing rocks at a pole when three dared one to throw a rock toward the class. The aide was watching the incident through the window. Suddenly the aide gave a yell and the rock came in. I was as surprised as we were and was very tense and nervous. After the next period's academics I then felt this was a sufficient cooling off period and took Wayne next door to establish the actual flow of events at that time. If I did not first help Wayne realize the actual flow of events how could I help him reach any solution to that specific problem.

Another objective is the process of taking a student from an immediate incident of frustration or failure to a student's past experience of progress. This act of Symptom Estrangement is to encourage or provide evidence that the student can attain. This technique is a real help in dealing with the level system and charting. I have a visible and comprehensive record to both parties of past accomplishments and present problem areas. This gives concrete evidence that the student has succeeded along with encouragement and that he can continue to succeed.

Massaging Value Areas is the encouragement of those value areas that are still intact. This, under a very intense situation, may give the one foundation that will keep a student from thinking of himself as a total failure. These are previously internalized concepts.

One student, if upset by her home situation, would carry her attitude of not caring to all other interpersonal relations and school work. But by massaging her own internalized concepts she was able to realize the distortion of reality that was occurring.

A fourth objective in this category might be New Tool Salesmanship. This is the use of a student's past positive life experience to promote an alternative reaction to a given situation.

were having a difficult time on the bus

because of a younger students constant calling them names or hitting them. They would usually retaliate verbally or physically which kept the cycle going. A number of times I confronted them both with the idea of ignoring Jimmy. They were not long in telling the success and using it also on a new student that entered their life space and wanted to be recognized. They had internalized to an extent, a new concept of how friendships should start.

The last objective in this category is the use of life experiences for Self Acceptance. I have had the opportunity to help a student realize this in his appropriate reaction to peer pressure and skillful manipulation of himself by others. When they realize this one can see the pride of realizing their accomplishment beaming from their face.

The second major category of objectives in Life Space Interview is labeled Emotional First Aid. These objectives are generally considered avenues of supportive assistance in helping a student gain control during a specific behavior.

Assisting a student in the Drain Off of Frustration Acidity has been a real help in my class. In observing my students the patterns that lead to explosive or inappropriate behavior can be observed and steps taken to derail the flow of events thus by passing the negative life experience. This is particularly evident in the academic problem areas

of the different students. Encouraging students not to be in a rush and applying that which they are studying at the time helps them slow down and study, not just complete that which they are working on.

The experience that comes with observation of the class will also be used in Support for the Management of Panic, Fury, or Guilt. This often involves a compassionate attitude toward the student and comforting him not his action. Then as soon as appropriate, relating the sequence of events that led to his action, or encouraging those areas in which he does control his actions.

A third and very important aspect of Emotional First Aid is the Maintenance of Communication Lines during times of Decay. With the individual student this may range from silence to a very dogmatic and argumentative form of Reality Rub In. Relating the sequence of events that is causing a breakdown in the communication that has been built.

Another very important mind saving guideline is the consistent and constant use of the Level System as the Rule for Behavioral and Social Traffic. The student and I are common members of a specific Life Space and are interacting under the same structure and we hold to it. Last of all is my function as an Umpire during peer group interaction. Consistent use of the Level System is again very

important for me to be a stable, consistent and therefore trustworthy member of the Life Space.

With a sketch of the possibilities of the Life Space Interview, there are a few basic concepts to keep in mind.

As a member of the Life Space of the student, with the responsibility of teaching, I will not be able to effectively meet the needs of the students if I do not have a knowledge of their individual past histories. Both to avoid soft areas that might cause a decay of rapport and also to curb as much buffaloing from the start as possible. This knowledge of the particular student's history also aids in the development of communication with the student which is necessary for the effective interpersonal interaction with those techniques of the Life Space Interview.

Also with a knowledge of basic problem areas and a consistent use of the charting system the student knows what to expect from me. In this the Level System is a very valuable vehicle to make sure the communication lines remain open. The student needs that genuine consistent base he can interact with.

It is probably becoming evident that the values that are being presented had better be acceptable and part of yourself. The majority of students have come from a home setting where there is not a consistency between that said and done.

The Life Space Interview is one area in which experimentation

by the use of variation is not advisable. The Life Space has to be consistant and especially its leaders, the teachers. In using the interpersonal interaction between the student and myself as a therapeutic tool I have seen the positive influence of my consistency in the students Life Space.

A few last considerations of the Life Space Interview.

1. The Timing of the interview is critical. It may take place during any part of the day, but be sure it does take place. I have a day end conference with each student.
2. Be sure the issue of interaction has been visible and is relevant to that day.
3. It is important that both parties are compatible and in an appropriate mood. Possibly that day may be appropriate for the aide to approach the student with the issue.
4. Be conscious of the impact of the physical surroundings, where the interview is held. You may want a very stimulating location at times and at other times you might not want an extra chair that could possibly distract the student.

In any of our interpersonal relationships we see that wisdom was necessary in developing that relationship. How much the more when trying to develop a relationship with someone that

does not have an appropriate behavioral pattern. The impact of the Life Space Interview varies, and who can measure the success? I have a responsibility to teach and this has been an effective tool in fulfilling that responsibility.